



The Dauntless Virgin of Siena

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(Author Unknown)

Cover art from a painting by Carlo Dolci
“Saint Catherine of Siena”
Circa 1665-70

Currently on display at the Dulwich Picture Gallery
in Dulwich, South London

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Saint Catherine of Siena

Today, Communism has almost overrun the sacred heritage of Catholicism in Europe. It has pressed a prostate Poland beneath its heel, when Poland was the onetime defender of the West against Islam. France, “Eldest daughter of the Church,” is half-submerged in apostasy. Italy is an outpost in constant and dire peril. The glory of Austria is utterly eclipsed. Today, indeed, we may well be tempted to despair of the Church's future.

It seems that war, heresy, and schism are unconquerable foes; but for those who can glean hope from the harvest of history, there is ample encouragement. The fourteenth century was as foreboding as our own. Yet, even in that chaos, as in this, the voice of Christ rings true, **“Behold, I am with you all days even to the consummation of the world.”** The Church in the fourteenth century, therefore, is an interesting analogy. However, there are other justifications for such a study. The Church's corruption in the fourteenth century is a weakness her enemies are fond of exposing in hopes of damaging a faith they know is doctrinally unassailable. Moreover, the Church's own ill-informed children regard the fourteenth century as a skeleton that must be kept carefully concealed in the family closet. Yet, there are obvious reasons for the corruption of the times.

Finally, hope comes to our own times. Hope comes from the fourteenth century, telling of regeneration through the nobility and power of Christian womanhood, exemplified in one selfless figure who towers above her fellows—a woman who swayed the destinies of men, a woman who gave her life to save the greatest institution of all times—the Catholic Church. That woman was the dauntless Catherine of Siena. Catherine set out to restore to the Church something it had lost through the corruption of mankind. Before she died, she had become the most discussed woman of her day. All the crowned heads of Europe knew her, many of them having employed her as their ambassadress. “Before her death, too, it was being debated whether she was a fanatic, a witch, an impostor, or a saint.”

This Catherine of Siena was a great apostle—if she were living today, we would call her the ideal Catholic Actionist, because she launched herself into every field of society where souls were to be won for Christ. The means she used to win them was her wonderful gift of friendship, that “rare and divine thing,” as Pere Lacordaire describes it. “The certain sign of a great soul and the highest visible reward attached to virtue.” Using this gift, embodying, as it does, sympathy, understanding, unselfishness, and love, she

made friends with poets, artists, politicians, lawyers, priests, housewives, soldiers, nobles, and sinners. Other contacts grew from these contacts, they broadened out, they spread to kings and queens, they spread to Avignon, and they spread to the Pope himself. Catherine of Siena was interested in the affairs of all who came to her. She was torn by their sorrows or rejoiced by their gladness, purposing all the time to bring them and their associates closer to God—that alone was Catherine's ambition and that is why she was the Ideal Catholic Actionist.

The Sword of Truth

Catherine was also a knight, like Joan of Arc, but her fight was to deliver not her country, but the Catholic Church, and her sword was the sword of Truth, because she was a Dominican. Her quest, then, was to conquer the world for Christ, to fight error and immorality, not by emotional devotions, not by sentimental outpourings, but by the sound doctrine of Truth, lived in her own life and imparted to others by means of her love for them. “Contemplate truth, then give to others the fruits of contemplation,” is an order every Dominican has accepted since the founding of the order. In Catherine’s case, it was an all-absorbing ideal, for with her eyes centered on Truth—namely, on God Himself—she saw the world in its right perspective and devoted herself to its reform.

We must consider the state of the Church in the fourteenth century and why reform was necessary before we discuss Catherine’s life.

The Fourteenth Century Church

When the Roman Empire fell to the barbarians in the year 378, devastation and disorder followed. Only the Catholic Church made order out of chaos. The Popes began to govern the temporal affairs as well as the spiritual affairs of Rome. Gradually, the Church became the most powerful governing body in Europe. It effected a glorious development of religious and intellectual life and it created an order of peace and industry, making labor a divine service. Pope Gregory not only resisted the half-savage

Lombards, but also sent missionaries to Britain and saw those very barbarian conquerors turning from Arianism to the Catholic Faith. He claimed a suzerainty* over the Spanish kings and he became the friend of the Franks. In 726, another Gregory, in a quarrel with Leo the Iconoclast, did all he could to preserve Italy from its Byzantine masters. He failed. However, the Romans, acclaiming him a deliverer, gave to the Papacy the Eternal City. Thus began what is now known as the Temporal Power of the Popes.

* Control over a dependent nation's international affairs but allowing it to control its internal affairs.

The Great Schism

From then on, the Popes claimed, and maintained, the right both to crown kings and to depose them. On Christmas Day of the year 800, Charlemagne received his crown as Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire from the hands of Pope Leo III. This act was often repeated during the next 650 years. Except for the king of France, at one time or another, every king had become a liegeman (a lord or vassal) to the Pope. Even William the Conqueror accepted the consecrated banner of his expedition from Pope Alexander II. Under Henry II and King John, England became a Papal fiefdom. After his excommunication, proud German Emperor, Henry IV, had to cross the Alps and come barefoot to Canossa as a suppliant to Pope Gregory VII. After being left to do penance in the snow for three days, Henry secured forgiveness and the restoration of his prerogatives from Pope Gregory. Even in 1076, Papal domination was challenged. All through the years, there had been factions of nobles who rebelled at the Church's interference in State affairs. They declared the order should be reversed and the State should be allowed a voice in Church government. Consequently, by the beginning of the fourteenth century, feudalism had decayed, city-States had come into being, nations had evolved, and interference from the Church in State affairs was being repudiated on all sides. One particular quarrel was in progress between Philip the Fair of France and Pope Boniface VIII. This quarrel would have dire consequences for both Church and State. The professed cause of the quarrel was the old one of lay-investiture and clerical exemption from taxation, but, in reality, Philip was chafing under Papal domination and was determined to use a dispute of transient importance to throw off the "yoke of vassalage" to Rome. In 1303, Pope Boniface, speaking for the Church of France, reiterated his claim

to immunity from State taxation. King Philip answered with scorn and defiance. Pope Boniface retaliated by setting September 8 as the day of Philip's deposition as King of France. Philip's reaction was to send his minister of vengeance, Nogaret, with 300 horsemen, to overthrow the Pope. Legend tells us many strange and varied things about their treatment of Pope Boniface but, whatever it was, their savagery resulted in his death within a few days. His successor, the Dominican, Pope Benedict XI, denounced the perpetrators of this crime. Pope Benedict was found dead within four weeks. Poison was judged to have killed him. After these happenings, the Papal throne was left vacant for several months during which time, it is believed, Philip the Fair exerted powerful influence to have Bertrand, Archbishop of Bordeaux, elected Pope.

After a lengthy conclave of eleven months, prolonged by the factions of French and Italian cardinals, Bertrand was eventually elected, crowned at Lyons in the presence of Philip the Fair, and speedily environed with a college of French Cardinals. Then, as Clement V, he took up his abode at Avignon, thus placing the Papacy within close touch of France. Under French influence, the Papacy was exposed to the domination of a civil ruler, while leaving Rome with its Vatican and Capitol to lie desolate. Patriots such as Dante and Petrarch might lament or rebel at this discredit to their fatherland, but all to no avail. For seventy years, seven successive Popes continued to reside at Avignon, claiming the protection of France, and thus forfeiting the Papal right to independence. Naturally, one country after another rebelled against this French authority—Germany, England, and Italy all refused to grant more than lip obedience to a Pope who was a French subject. The Papacy lost its influence over Catholics in all lands who, naturally enough, confused nationality with religion while the ill-governed Papal States seemed easy prey for those wandering military leaders who plundered Europe. Even Florence was at war with the Pope. Meanwhile, the Church had become corrupt and badly governed. The chief cause of this can be found in that fearful catastrophe known as The Black Death. Let us see what happened.

In January of 1348, three trading vessels sailed into the port of Genoa, having fled from the Crimea, where a plague was raging. It was immediately discovered that the crew was infected, but not before the plague had spread into the city, carrying off six-sevenths of the population. Soon, all of Italy was ravaged by the disease. Then, as one author says, "The malignant tongue of infection forked, darting across the Adriatic to Hungary,

Austria, Germany, Poland, and striking north into Switzerland. By the spring, Spain was also full of the poison. Sicily, Sardinia, and Corsica were devastated. The pestilence raced from Marseilles up the Rhone Valley, through Languedoc to Flanders and Holland. It was in England by July, devouring London, then across into Scotland it swept, bringing ruin to Denmark, Norway, and Sweden.” One historian describes this plague as “the most awful calamity that ever befell the human race.” Though we cannot fully subscribe to that estimate, we can judge the extent of the catastrophe from the fact that from one-third to one-half of the population of Europe was dead in two years. The deaths amongst the clergy were all out of proportion to their numbers, for the simple reason that, in their efforts to minister to the plague-stricken, they had fallen victims to the scourge. The effect of this plague on the Church is obvious. It shook the Church to its very foundation at a time when it was already weakened. Although the Papacy was weak, the religious orders and their priests had strived to maintain religion throughout Europe. However, these religious orders and their priests were now almost extinct. Some convents and monasteries had been left without one surviving religious. Whole districts were bereft of a priest to minister to the people. Consequently, immorality and irreligion soon became widespread. What could be done? The only method possible was to ordain more priests quickly and still more quickly to collect and profess religious teachers. Consequently, theological training was curtailed and the standards of religious life were lowered. The evil effects of this were lasting. Some of the new members who were quickly gathered into the Church proved to be unsuitable, which impaired the perfection of religious life. The same happened in the ranks of the secular clergy. In order that public worship might continue, very young and often uneducated clerics had to be ordained.

At the same time, the old Church revenues were kept in force so one man would hold several Bishoprics and collect their revenue. This meant that one Bishop could not see to the conduct of each of his dioceses, even if he felt disposed to do so. What was far worse, this enticing opportunity to collect a large income attracted men who were quite without spiritual ideals--they simply wanted wealth. Consequently, devoid of religious aims, they lived grossly immoral lives and allowed those under their care to do likewise. Luxury and vice widely prevailed. The people, seeing the laxity of the hierarchy, lost all respect for Church authority. As often can happen in such situations, the people confused respect for the doctrine of the Church with respect for the government. Therefore, they fell away from the practice of religion.

That the Church emerged from this crisis with her doctrine intact and her powers not only unimpaired, but also greatly strengthened, is a sure sign of her divine origin. Any other institution the world over would never have survived this decadence. To the Catholic Church alone, Christ promised, **“I am with thee all days even to the consummation of the world . . . and the gates of hell shall not prevail against thee.”**

This period of which I have been speaking is only one of countless times when Christ has fulfilled that promise. Among other efforts, He raised up saints to reform His Church, martyrs to shed their blood in defense of its doctrines, and apostles and missionaries, like Saint Catherine of Siena, to set an example of holiness in a sinful world. This brings us, then, to a study of Saint Catherine, that dauntless woman, who, as friend, ambassador, and saint, played her part, ordained from all eternity, in regenerating the Church.

The Great Apostolate

Catherine Benincasa was born at Siena on March 25, 1347. She was the youngest of a very large family of twenty-five. She died in Rome on April 29, 1380. In her brief thirty-three years she accomplished so varied and so striking an apostolate that one historian declares, “She was the greatest and most portentous woman that, second to the Virgin Mother, has ever appeared in history—the most sublime ambassadress that God has ever sent to men.”

As a tiny child, she was remarkable for her gaiety and brightness, qualities that persisted throughout her life and endeared her to all her disciples.

Catherine was familiar with the black and white Dominican habit from her earliest years, since there was a monastery of Dominican friars in Siena. She knew the white signified purity and the black humility and penance—virtues that strongly appealed to her young heart. She decided that one day she would become a Dominican, but, in the meantime, she must make herself holy—a task she undertook by various and strange means, including the reciting of a “Hail Mary” on every step of the stairs. We can imagine the effect of this on an irate mother who might be waiting for Catherine to bring a message from the top of the house! This was only one of the many things that antagonized a mother whose temper was seldom at rest. In her search for holiness, Catherine also hit on

a plan to run away from home to live as a hermit. She took up her abode in a cave outside the city and devoted herself most assiduously to prayer. When evening came, the gnawing pangs of hunger and the fears of being alone in the darkness so terrified her that she fled back to the city, leaving her hermitage desolate.

One afternoon when she was six years old, Catherine was returning home with her brother along a road winding into Siena. Catherine was lagging behind absorbed in her childhood fancies, perhaps picking wild flowers or playing make-believe with the little figures that populate many childish imaginations. Suddenly, raising her eyes across the valley, she saw a most extraordinary vision above the Church of Saint Dominic. It took the form of a throne “decked as for a king and on the throne was Jesus Christ, the Savior of the world, in Papal raiment and with the Pope's crown upon His head.” With Him were Saint Peter, Saint Paul, and Saint John the Evangelist. Catherine, rapt in wonder at this marvelous vision, suddenly saw Our Lord smile tenderly upon her, then stretch forth His hand and bless her with the Sign of the Cross. Meanwhile, her brother had rambled on in the belief that she was following. Now, looking back, he perceived her gazing into the heavens with an expression of extreme happiness on her face. He called to her unavailingly then, boy-like, returned, and pulled her roughly by the arm. Then it was as though Catherine awoke from a deep sleep; she stood dazed for a moment, then burst into tears at the realization that her beautiful vision had vanished.

We can imagine the two children walking silently onward after this strange episode—people were laughing and talking in the streets, children were playing, everything was just as usual. Nevertheless, for Catherine everything had become different, “for the highest power in the world had overshadowed her, Eternity had spoken to her child's heart.” Catherine, like the Apostles, had “seen the Lord.” His look had penetrated to the depths of her soul and sat within her soul echoing that urgent message heard so often by men and women whom God has destined to serve Him. “Come, follow Me—follow Me away from father and mother, from sisters and brothers, from house and home, from your town and country, follow Me wherever there are souls to be won.” Catherine responded willingly to such a call, though she knew that it would cost her the material happiness this world offers. At the age of seven, she made a vow of virginity. Going before the statue of Our Lady, she dedicated her life to God, promising to have no other bridegroom but Him.

Typically, Italian girls reach maturity much sooner than their western sisters. Consequently, when Catherine was twelve her mother, deciding that she must be betrothed, set about looking for a suitable husband and insisting that her daughter should deck herself out in all the finery calculated to attract the male fancy. For a while, Catherine enjoyed the happy life thus offered her, as well as the company of the young men who sought her affection. Soon though, she realized all the activity was just empty pleasure, unworthy of one who knew in her heart that God was calling her to higher things. At the same time, she remembered her vow of virginity and, to the surprise and annoyance of her family, declared she would not marry. Furthermore, to frustrate her mother's plans to make her attractive, she cut off her hair. When this was discovered, a torrent of maternal abuse and invective was poured onto Catherine. Her family felt they would be disgraced by having an old maid on their hands. Therefore, to bring her to her senses, they decided, while waiting for her hair to grow, she should be the servant of the house and be treated as such. Consequently, the maid was dismissed and Catherine was set to the menial work of cooking and washing-up for the family of twenty-five.

Not a murmur of complaint escaped her during this trying time while suffering family persecution and scorn from her friends. One night, as she lay in the little servant's room at the back of the house, she had a strange dream, in which she saw Saint Dominic offering her the black and white habit with the words, "Be of good heart, my daughter, and fear not; assuredly you shall wear this habit!"

At the age of sixteen, when her family became convinced of her aversion to marriage, she was allowed to take the habit of a Dominican Tertiary. From that time forward, her life is divided into two distinct periods—1) from the age of sixteen to nineteen when she devoted herself to contemplation and prayer, subconsciously preparing herself for the great apostolate she would soon undertake and 2) the last fourteen years of her life spent in the service of her neighbors and the Church.

The first three years were passed in a small brick-paved room in the basement of her father's house where, as a Dominican Tertiary, she fasted, watched, and prayed—never emerging except to go to Mass and Confession at the Church of Saint Dominic.

Mortification

During this time mortification figured largely in her life though she was accustomed to warning her disciples against great corporal penance—it led, she declared, to self-complacency and pride. Ecstasies and visions, too, were given to her, as is sometimes the case with souls wholly absorbed in God. Ecstasies and visions are not an integral part of true holiness, which really consists of loving God. From our love of God arises unquestioned acceptance of the Divine Will, so we can then work in close union with Christ for the salvation of souls. A feature of Catherine's life that is more worthy of our consideration is the astonishing way she mastered temptations during those three years of preparation. Catherine was essentially human and possessed all the evil tendencies of fallen nature. However, in her vision of truth she saw that temptations overcome mean growth in self-knowledge, an essential factor of humility. Therefore, she did not become despondent when subjected to temptations. Moreover, she longed to offer to her Lord an undivided will and perfect purity of heart, both of which can only be proven under temptation.

Now, the world of Catherine's day was exceptionally corrupt. Impurity was a vice countenanced on all sides. It is not astonishing therefore that the devil, knowing the power for good she would have in such a world, strove with all his might to stir up the lower passions of her nature by lascivious visions, threatening to torment her until she succumbed to his wiles. Night after night and day after day, he assailed her sight with pictures so impure that only a diabolical mind could create them. He tempted her constantly to give in and be like those whom he presented to her gaze. Catherine, with a supreme effort of the will, declared repeatedly that she had chosen Christ alone as her lover and suffering as her joy. At one time, when the temptations seemed to possess her very soul, she threw herself at the foot of the crucifix saying, "Lord, where wert Thou while my soul was being so sorely tormented?" "I was in thy heart, Catherine," came the answer, "for I will not leave anyone who does not first leave Me by mortal sin." Then, with the realization that she was one of those white-robed warriors of the Dominican army, whose war is against such vices, she took courage and, repeating the Holy Name, fought her way through temptations to peace.

After another similar victory, Our Lord appeared to her uttering these consoling words, "Because thou hast, for love of Me, renounced all worldly joys and desires, I have resolved solemnly to keep My betrothal with thee and to take thee for My bride in faith." As He spoke, He put on her finger a golden ring and said, "Fear nothing, thou art shielded with the armor of faith and shall prevail over all thy enemies."

Soon after, Our Lord commanded her to go forth from her seclusion and labor for the salvation of souls by works of charity and zeal. For the next few years, we know she was devoted to alms giving and nursing the sick of the city. Here she showed a predilection for the most repulsive cases. One of Catherine's chosen patients was an old woman covered with cancerous sores that no one would attend. Catherine visited her every day, bathed her sores, and attended to all her needs, while getting nothing but violent abuse from the woman for her kindness. The woman even went so far as to spread the most devastating stories about Catherine's moral character. Even this did not lessen her devotion. At length, when the malicious old creature died and no one would go near enough to bury her, Catherine dug the grave and buried her with her own hands.

She also repeatedly visited the prisons where hosts of men and women were sent to execution in dereliction and despair. Over and over again, Catherine won these souls for God. Sometimes she would spend whole nights in the cell of the condemned, pleading with them to turn to God before the morning brought their execution. On one occasion, a young man was unjustly condemned to death. Try as they would, the priests could not convert him from his desire for revenge and from his blasphemies against God, Who, he thought, had abandoned him. We are told he walked up and down his cell like a madman and would not hear of confession. Catherine however went to the unhappy youth and she prayed and pleaded with him for days. At length, her words gave him so much comfort and joy that, having made his confession, he begged her to be with him at the hour of execution. "Stay with me and do not leave me," he pleaded; "then all will be well and I shall die content." At dawn the next morning, she waited for him on the scaffold. Reading the way she describes it herself, try to imagine the virile courage and strength of soul she must have had. She says, "I waited for him then, at the place of execution, and I waited in continual prayer. Calling on Our Lady, I prayed and did violence to Heaven to obtain the grace that, at the last moment, Mary would give him light and peace. Then he came, gentle as a lamb, and when he saw me, he began to smile and he would that I

should make the Sign of the Cross over him. I made it and said to him, 'Up to the marriage, dear, my brother; soon shall you be in life everlasting.' With great meekness, he lay down and I placed his head aright (upon the block), and bent down, and bade him think only of the blood of the Lamb. His lips said nothing but 'Jesus' and 'Catherine.' As he spoke thus, I took his head in my hands and I closed my eyes and said, 'I will.' Then I saw his soul meeting with Christ and I knew that it had been saved by pure grace and mercy, without merit. Then his soul turned, as the bride turns, at the bridegroom's door and, looking back, bends her head in thanks to those who have attended her. But when the body had been taken away, my soul rested in such peace and quiet and in a fragrance of blood so sweet that I could not bear to wash from off my habit the blood that had sprinkled it."

Meanwhile, a host of friends and disciples had gathered around this wonderful woman—politicians, soldiers, poets, outcasts, kings, and queens sought her advice. People implored her mediation in the countless family quarrels that destroyed peoples' lives at that time. In every case, Catherine showed a vitality of interest that springs from true, unselfish friendship and that can draw out and sustain the best in every nature, strong or weak. She gave herself whole-heartedly to each person as though his life and concerns were all that mattered to her. In every case, she also insisted on purity of life and prayer. She never began this spiritual intercourse with a rebuke, but, identifying herself with the sinner, she pointed out that she, too, knew those sins of the body. Then she moved on to contemplation of some divine truth—the mercy of Christ, the purity of Our Lady, the wonder of God's love, indicating at the same time the loveliness and desirability of virtue. Lastly, she deftly contrasted the conduct of her client to that divine truth, letting him see himself in all the ugliness of his sin. Thus, in true Dominican style, she led the sinner to repentance by a positive method, stimulating his will to virtue by visions of holiness and by depicting his offended God in such a way that the most degraded sinner would feel ashamed. She even dealt with the notoriously wicked Queen Joanna of Naples in this fashion.

She could not endure sentimentality or effeminate weakness. On the contrary, strength was a quality she required from all her friends, both men and women. They must be strong personalities, ready to put their hands to painful and difficult tasks. "Do not stand still; do not look back; do not leave hold of the plough," she was fond of saying to those

inclined to hesitate on the road to conversion or inclined to waver in the conquest of souls. In this she was merely echoing Our Lord Himself, Who said, "He who puts his hand to the plough and looks back is not worthy of Me."

Adviser to Popes

Meanwhile, the residence of the Popes at Avignon and the corruption of the clergy were having evil repercussions all over Europe. One city after another revolted against the over-lordship of the Pope and wars broke out with efforts of kings and rulers directed towards crushing the temporal power of the Papacy. Papal emissaries came to Catherine to discuss with her methods of reform and appeasement. She listened to them all, exhorting them to reform their lives and to work for the reformation of the Church. Such was their confidence that they persuaded her to go as ambassadress to these unruly cities in an attempt to make peace. She did so, gladly, traveling to Florence, Pisa, and Lucca as the Pope's representative. In 1376, she visited the Pope in Avignon to plead for the rebellious city of Florence. This was her great opportunity to plead personally with the Pope to return to Rome and to reform the lives of the clergy. This she felt was her life's crusade and Avignon her battlefield, where, by means of her powerful sword of Truth, she would carry the cause of God to victory.

Admitted to the presence of the Pope, she pleaded first for the city of Florence. Then, with all the vehemence of a passionate nature, she exhorted Gregory to cast aside his idleness and luxury, to be a man, and to do what he knew was his duty. She pointed out the corruption of the cardinals, telling them to their very faces that their vicious lives were a disgrace to mankind and would certainly bring down the wrath of God on the world. The whole Papal court stood aghast at the daring words of this astonishing woman. One official insultingly asked, "Couldn't the Florentines find a man to send instead of a wretched little woman like you?" The Cardinals pleaded with the Pope to get rid of her. They even threatened her life, but it mattered not to Catherine if she suffered death, provided she carried to victory the cause of God. For, even though she might condemn the human weakness of the Pope, she regarded his office as the most sanctified on earth.

For days, then, she appeared before the timid Gregory, each time more vigorously urging him to cease disgracing his noble office. "Be a man, Holy Father. Arise! I say to you that you have nothing to fear. If you do not do your duty, then, indeed, you might have cause to fear. You know you ought to come to Rome—then be a man and come; and if any try to stay you, turn to him and say, as did Our Lord, 'Get behind me, Satan.'"

So deep an impression did her words make on Gregory that he resolved to obey her command and return to Rome. Moreover, with his soul swelling with Catherine's supernatural energy, he ignored the pleas of the cardinals, ignored even his own aged father, who, falling on his knees, begged him to remain in Avignon. Meanwhile, the cardinals appealed to the king of France to intervene. King Louis hastened to the Papal court to deal personally with this obnoxious woman, but, at his very first interview, he was not only won over to her way of thinking, but was even persuaded to lead a crusade against the infidels. On January 17, 1377, Pope Gregory XI made his triumphant entry into Rome and the Babylonian captivity ended.

Catherine spent the next three years in Rome repeatedly active as ambassadress and adviser to Pope Gregory XI and his successor, Pope Urban VI, working tirelessly for the reformation of the Church, serving the destitute and the afflicted, and dispatching eloquent letters on behalf of the Papacy to the courts and governments of Europe. Three secretaries were needed to write her letters, which she dictated simultaneously. Today, these letters, four hundred in number, together with her Dialogue and a series of prayers, rank among the classics of the Italian language, written as they are in the beautiful Tuscan tongue of the fourteenth century. By this time, however, her strength was being rapidly consumed and, with that heroic self-sacrifice so characteristic of her nature, she besought God to let her bear the punishment for all the sins of the world, asking Him to receive the sacrifice of her body for the unity and renovation of the Church. In her last agony, it seemed the Church was laid upon her shoulders and that it was crushing her to death with its weight. After a prolonged suffering of three months she died with the words, "Thou, Lord, callest me and I am coming to Thee . . . Father, into Thy hands I commend my spirit." It was April 29, 1380.

To all appearance, Saint Catherine's life had been a comparative failure for, though she had labored for fourteen years, when she lay dying there was little evidence of the good she had accomplished or the good she had caused. The Church was soon to be torn by

the Great Schism, while corruption and pluralities would continue their dire work until the convocation of the great Council of Trent. In world history, however, other similar failures have proven to be “triumphant defeats of which Victory herself might be jealous.” After all, Our Lord died with the words, “Traitor” and “Impostor,” ringing in His ears, while His very Apostles were too ashamed to show their faces. His defeat, however, was the sign of victory to a redeemed people. Catherine of Siena gave her life for a great and noble cause. She had helped to reform the Papacy. More importantly, she had collected a mighty band of men and women dedicated to the service of God. As discussed earlier, the friends of Catherine made other contacts and their influence extended far and wide. In reality, it was her influence, for was it not she who had pointed out their paths to them and shaped their destiny for good? Her whole life had been spent in the service of God and of His church. She could well be depicted in art with her protecting arm encircling the Papal tiara! Though to her contemporaries she appeared to fail, history has given the lie to their biased judgments, while the verdict of heaven comes in her own assurance: “God asketh not a perfect work, but infinite desire.”

Nihil obstat:

F. MOYNIHAN,
Censor Deputatus

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✠ D. MANNIX,
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“Saint Catherine of Siena”
Painting by Giovanni Battista Tiepolo
Circa 1746
Currently on display at the Kunsthistorisches Museum
in Vienna, Austria

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